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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [KWBG](#) [PINS](#) [IS](#)

SUBJECT: BROAD POLITICAL SUPPORT FOR BARAK'S FIRM HAND
AGAINST SETTLER EXTREMISM

REF: JERUSALEM 2197

Classified By: Political Counselor Marc J. Sievers. Reason 1.4 (B/D)

¶1. (C) Summary: The Israeli Defense Forces and Border Police evacuated more than 100 right-wing settlers and their supporters from the disputed "House of Contention" in Hebron on December 4 in a lightning operation that took just 36 minutes to complete (reftel). Although PM Olmert and Public Security Minister Avi Dichter (Kadima) and several other senior officials were involved in the compartmentalized and secret planning of the operation, the pundits focused on, and generally praised, MOD Barak for asserting his leadership. The timing of this tactical surprise coincided with the rescheduled Labor Party primaries, and led right-wing settler mouthpiece, Rishon-Hatzofe, to insinuate that Barak's "electoral temptation overshadowed the fear of bloodshed" and to urge its readers to respond to Barak at the ballot box. Mainstream Israelis -- including Kadima, Likud, and even Yisrael Beiteinu party members as well as most media commentators -- approved of the operation to restore law and order and to proceed with the evacuation. Sima Kadmon of Yediot Ahronoth noted that the allegation was raised that Barak decided on the operation for political motives, to which she commented: "If this is the case, he should be congratulaed for the best political decision he has made in the past year." End Summary.

LABOR-KADIMA-LIKD-YB FOR UPHOLDING LAW AND ORDER

¶2. (C) For the first time in months, Ehud Barak won plaudits, tis time for his role in the successful evacuation of settlers from the "House of Contention" in Hebron. The state had ordered the inhabitants to vacate the premises, and the High Court of Justice ruled on November 16 that this order should stand -- pending a lower court ruling on the ownership of the property, which remains in dispute. In the days preceding the evacuation, Barak appeared to be in a conciliatory mode, busily engaging the YESHA Council of settler leadership and looking for political means to defuse the tense situation in and around Hebron. But he defied expectations that the Israeli defense and security establishment would dally on an issue as sensitive as Hebron, and opted to employ surprise against the Hebron extremists and uphold Israeli law by force.

¶3. (SBU) Sima Kadmon of Yediot Ahronoth noted that the allegation was raised that Barak decided on the Hebron operation for political motives, to which she commented: "If this is the case, he should be congratulated for the best political decision he has made in the past year." Labor insiders hope that Barak's decisive action will boost his popularity and help halt Labor's precipitous decline in the polls. A Kadima insider maintained that the Hebron evacuation would have no political impact, as mainstream Israel -- including Labor, Kadima, Likud and even Yisrael Beiteinu -- supported the state's determination to carry out its decision and uphold the law through the evacuation of the

Hebron house. Our Kadima contact clarified that before the November 16 Court decision, the Hebron house issue was a political football. Once the Court ruled on the issue and concurred that it was lawful for the State to evacuate the House, then the matter became a matter of upholding law and order that attracted broad political support among mainstream Israeli parties and politicians.

14. (U) Newly minted Likud candidate and former IDF Chief of General Staff, Boogie Yaalon apparently agreed, telling Israel radio December 5 that "a strong hand must be used so that lawbreakers cannot rampage." He continued his critique of the extremists' violent reaction to the Hebron evacuation, stating: "Jews carrying out a pogrom (i.e., settler attacks on Palestinians) is something that must not happen. And when it does, the rule of law must be wielded in full force to uproot this." Commentators assess that Netanyahu, who is busy trying to repress the far-right wing of the Likud Party, probably agrees with Yaalon -- and note that he was the one who agreed to Israeli redeployment from Hebron in 1998 following the Baruch Goldstein killings at the Tomb of the Patriarchs. Netanyahu joined Labor, Kadima and Yisrael Beiteinu leaders in a call, published December 4 in Yediot Ahronoth, for the Hebron house settlers to respect the law and the High Court ruling, and not to employ violence against the IDF or police.

15. (C) Commenting on the decision of the Yisrael Beiteinu Party to join the Labor-Kadima-Likud consensus, YB candidate and former Ambassador to the U.S. Danny Ayalon told poloff December 5 the evacuation was "a great victory for the rule of law." He assessed that every action can be viewed as

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political, but praised "good politics as better than nothing at all." He also praised Barak for upholding the best tradition of the state. He remarked that this action signaled a shift toward "much less tolerance" of the extremists and assessed that the support that Shas demonstrated for the Hebron House inhabitants constituted cynical politics at its worse. He argued that Shas, as a Haredi party, does not accept the authority of secular law or the State of Israel. Ayalon predicted that if violence continued, there would need to be massive arrests of provocateurs.

SHAS SUPPORTS SETTLER EXTREMISTS, NOT THE STATE

16. (C) Shas spokesman and advisor to Party leader and Minister Eli Yishai, Roie Lahmanovitch, told poloff December 5 that Yishai visited the house after the evacuation and condemned the operation. Shas MK Nissim Zeev was still living in the house and was evacuated along with settlers and other supporters. Shas Spiritual leader Ovadia Yosef had blessed Zeev's decision to move into the house in November following the Court decision on the matter. Yishai's position, endorsed by Ovadia, is that the High Court was wrong to "order" the evacuation of the house before the courts could sort out the ownership issue. Zeev's decision to live in the house -- unlike religious Zionist MKs, such as Uri Ariel, who visited often but did not move in -- could bolster Shas credentials in the religious Zionist camp. However, even some of the organs of this camp who disagreed with the State's handling of the Hebron House expressed criticism of their own radical fringe. For example, Dr. Ronald Breiman, a founder of the HaTikva nationalist Zionist party that is opposed to the creation of a Palestinian state, told poloff on December 5 that the Hebron settlers' behavior damaged the overall cause for the continued settlement of Jews in the West Bank. This assessment was shared by many of the established settlement advocates, such as Israel Harel of Ha'aretz newspaper and Aliza Herbst of YESHA news, a settler mouthpiece.

18. (C) Comment: It is too early to tell whether Barak will reap lasting benefit from his tactical success in planning

and executing the Hebron house eviction, but Labor Party insiders predict that this action combined with surprisingly successful primaries, which defied low expectations both in terms of voter participation (54%) and the successful polling of strong candidates, will boost Labor's yield in the coming elections to as many as 15 or 16 seats. While this is still fewer than Labor's current 19, it would be a much better showing than polls last week predicted (as low as 6). On the policy front, it is not clear whether this evacuation is a one-time event or the start of a serious -- and much-needed -- crackdown on settler violence and compliance with Israeli court decisions and state commitments on controversial settlements and outposts. Ben Caspit of Ma'ariv quoted senior sources in the Prime Minister's bureau as having equated "Jewish terrorists" as no less bad and dangerous than the Arab terrorists, and having warned that the time has come to treat them accordingly.

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